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ABSTRACT

The report, based on a 1974 sample of 47,000 households, describes the school enrollment of older adults working toward a high school or college diploma or a trade school certificate. Data, summarized in narrative and tabular form, show that two-thirds of the one and one-half million students age 35 and over in the United States were enrolled in college (including 285,000 in graduate school), and about 400,000 were attending trade or vocational school. The remainder (80,000) were enrolled in high school. About 14% of the adults in school were black. Women students in the group generally had higher labor force participation rates, age for age, than women in the population as a whole. Younger male students in the group had rates similar to those of their nonstudent contemporaries. The rate for male students 45 and over was substantially higher than for nonstudents. This finding suggests that older persons in school had a very strong attachment to the work force, and their school enrollment was therefore ancillary to career development. A four-page explanatory note briefly describes the basic labor force concepts, sample design, estimating methods, and reliability of the data. (Author/MS)

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Going Back to School at 35 and Over

Special Labor
Force Report 184

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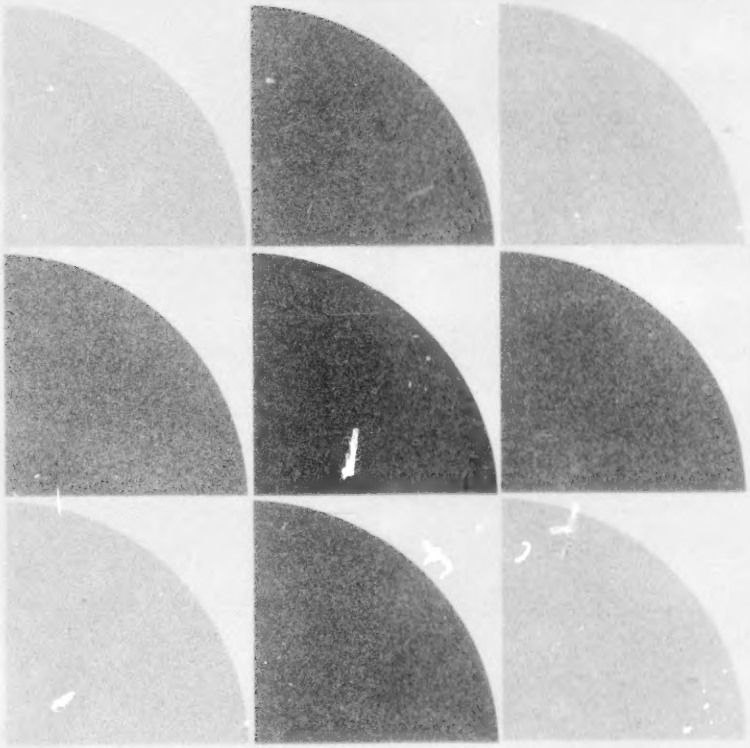
Bureau of Labor Statistics



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Special Labor Force Report shows over one million workers 35 years old and over enrolled in school—two-thirds in college and others in high school and vocational training

Going back to school at 35 and over

ANNE McDOUGALL YOUNG

ONE AND A HALF MILLION PERSONS 35 years of age or older were enrolled in high school or college or attending a vocational school in October 1974—about 2 percent of the Nation's population in this age group.[1] This count of older adults in school covers only students working toward a high school or college diploma or a trade school certificate. It does not include the very large group of people who attended classes on special issues or personal interests.

Adults go back to school for many reasons. Some workers may feel that they are handicapped by obsolete skills or may recognize that they are at a disadvantage when competing with those with more education. Others may wish to brush up on new developments in their fields. Housewives, planning to rejoin the labor force when their children no longer require constant attention, may return to school to complete education which was halted many years earlier when they married.

Some high school and college level programs are aimed at meeting the particular needs of people above the conventional school age. However, most of the adults were enrolled along with younger students; they contributed to the rapid increase since 1968 in enrollment in public 2-year colleges and technical institutions.[2]

Two-thirds of the 1.5 million students age 35 and over in the United States were enrolled in college (including 285,000 in graduate school), and about 400,000 were attending trade or vocational school. The remainder (80,000) were enrolled in high school.[3] (See table 1.) About 14 percent of the adults in school were black,[4] a somewhat higher percentage than their share of the population over 35.

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Women students in the group generally had higher labor force participation rates, age for age, than women in the population as a whole. Younger male students in the group had rates similar to those of their nonstudent contemporaries; the rate for male students 45 and over was substantially higher than for nonstudents. This finding suggests that older persons in school had a very strong attachment to the work force, and their school enrollment was therefore ancillary to career development. More women than men were enrolled but, as in the population as a whole, a higher proportion of the men than of the women were in the labor force. (See table 2.) Men enrolled in regular school [5] had about the same labor force participation rate as those attending vocational school. Among women, the rate was lower for those in vocational school; probably fewer of the vocational students had the qualifications to obtain an acceptable job before completing their special training.

College enrollment

The number and proportion of adults age 35 and over in school were about the same in October 1974 as in October 1972, when enrollment data were first collected for this age group, but relatively fewer were in vocational school and more were in college. The number of persons age 35 and over in college rose sharply (by more than 230,000), while the number of vocational school students in this age group dropped by 170,000. Recruitment of students by many colleges seeking to maintain enrollment levels apparently coincided with the desire of many workers to increase their education.

About 2 out of 3 students over 35 (both men and women) were enrolled in college. Among these students, approximately the same proportions of men and women were attending college part time, but

From the December 1975
Monthly Labor Review

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
Bureau of Labor Statistics

Table 1. Type of school attended by persons 35 and older, by sex, marital status of women, and race, October 1974

[Percent distribution]

Item	Total		Elementary and high school	College					Trade or vocational[2]
	Number (in thousands)	Percent		Total	Full time	Part time	Undergraduate[1]	Graduate[1]	
Both sexes	1,502	100.0	5.3	67.9	13.9	54.0	48.9	19.0	26.8
Men	690	100.0	4.3	68.7	15.4	53.3	46.7	22.0	27.0
Women	812	100.0	6.2	67.2	12.7	54.6	50.9	16.4	26.6
Married, spouse present	595	100.0	6.2	66.6	11.4	55.1	52.4	14.1	27.2
Other marital status	217	100.0	6.0	69.1	16.1	53.0	46.5	22.6	24.9
White	1,297	100.0	3.4	69.7	13.3	56.3	50.2	19.4	26.9
Black[3]	205	100.0	17.1	57.1	17.6	39.5	41.0	16.1	25.9

[1] Includes both full-time and part-time students.

[2] In the Current Population Survey, these schools are called "special schools."

[3] See text footnote 4.

Table 2. Employment status of persons age 35 and over in school, by kind of school, age, sex, and race, October 1974

[Numbers in thousands]

Age, sex, and race	In school				In regular school[1]				In trade or vocational school[2]			
	Total	Labor force		Not in labor force	Total	Labor force		Not in labor force	Total	Labor force		Not in labor force
		Number	Percent of total in school			Number	Percent of total in school			Number	Percent of total in school	
Both sexes	1,502	1,154	76.8	348	1,100	873	79.4	227	402	281	69.9	121
35 to 39 years	509	403	79.2	106	425	339	79.8	86	84	64	76.2	20
40 to 44 years	398	305	76.6	93	286	227	79.4	59	112	78	69.6	34
45 to 49 years	241	191	79.3	50	174	140	80.5	34	67	51	(3)	16
50 to 55 years	170	140	82.4	30	108	94	87.0	14	62	46	(3)	16
55 years and over	184	114	62.0	70	107	72	67.3	35	77	42	54.4	35
Men	690	607	88.0	83	504	443	87.9	61	186	164	88.2	22
35 to 39 years	269	237	88.1	32	227	198	87.2	29	42	39	(3)	3
40 to 44 years	185	166	89.7	19	131	118	90.1	13	54	48	(3)	6
45 years and over	236	204	85.4	32	146	127	87.0	19	90	77	85.6	13
Women	812	547	67.4	265	596	430	72.1	166	216	117	54.2	99
35 to 39 years	240	166	69.2	74	198	141	71.2	57	42	25	(3)	17
40 to 44 years	213	140	65.7	73	155	110	71.0	45	58	30	(3)	28
45 years and over	359	241	67.1	118	243	179	73.7	64	116	62	53.4	54
Married, spouse present	595	395	66.4	200	433	309	71.4	124	162	86	53.1	76
Other marital status	217	152	70.0	65	163	121	74.2	42	54	31	(3)	23
White	1,297	999	77.0	298	948	755	79.6	193	349	244	69.9	105
Black[4]	205	155	75.6	50	152	118	77.6	34	53	37	(3)	16

[1] Regular schools are part of a recognized regular school system, public, private, or parochial. They can be schools at any level—elementary, high, college, or professional. Regular schools may advance a person toward an elementary school certificate or high school diploma, or a college or professional school degree.

[2] In the Current Population Survey, these schools are termed "special schools." They are outside regular school systems and offer trade, business, vocational, or other job-related courses designed primarily to transmit a skill.

[3] Percent not shown where base is less than 75,000.

[4] See text footnote 4.

more of the women were in undergraduate programs. (See table 3.) About 3 out of 4 of the women college students in this age group were married, but their proportions in college full and part time and their labor force participation rate were not significantly different from those for women in other marital status categories. The labor force rate for all these women students was much higher than that for all women of comparable age. Most of the women over 35 who went back to school probably did so because they had strong career ambitions. In addition, those students who were already in the labor

Table 3. Labor force status of persons enrolled in regular school, by type of school, age and sex, October 1974

[Numbers in thousands]

Type of school and age	Both sexes				Men				Women			
	Population	Labor force		Not in labor force	Population	Labor force		Not in labor force	Population	Labor force		Not in labor force
		Number	Percent of population			Number	Percent of population			Number	Percent of population	
Enrolled in regular school	1,100	873	79.4	227	504	443	89.7	61	596	430	72.1	166
Elementary or high school	80	53	66.3	27	30	21	(1)	9	50	32	(1)	18
College	1,020	820	80.4	200	474	422	89.0	52	546	398	72.9	148
Full-time	209	105	50.2	104	106	64	60.4	42	103	42	40.8	61
Part time	811	715	88.2	96	368	358	97.3	10	443	356	80.4	87
Undergraduate	735	574	78.1	161	322	288	89.4	34	413	286	69.2	127
Graduate	285	246	86.3	39	152	134	88.8	18	133	112	84.2	21
35 to 39 years	425	339	79.8	86	227	198	87.3	29	198	141	71.2	57
40 to 44 years	286	227	79.4	59	131	118	90.1	13	155	110	71.0	45
45 years and over	389	307	78.9	82	146	127	87.0	19	243	179	73.7	64

[1] Percent not shown where base is less than 75,000.

force may have been able to take advantage of employer-sponsored education or to pay for schooling from their earnings.

A larger proportion of white than black students age 35 and over were enrolled in college in October 1974. In 1972, the percentages were about the same. Over this period, the proportion of white students in college increased and that in vocational school declined; the proportions of black students in each of these types of schools were about the same in both years.

Elementary and secondary school enrollment

More than half of the 80,000 older adults enrolled in elementary or high school were 45 years of age or over, and 6 out of 10 were women. The labor force rate for the whole group—66 percent—was about the same as that for all persons age 35 to 64 with comparable educational attainment.

Some of these persons returned to school because they believed that more education was required on the job or to qualify for a better job. Others went to school mainly for personal satisfaction. Numerically, the group was split nearly evenly between blacks and whites, so the proportion of all older students enrolled at these levels was substantially higher for blacks.

Vocational school enrollment

About a quarter of the older persons in school in October 1974 were attending a postsecondary trade or vocational school. The number and proportion of older students in this kind of school have dropped since 1972, as they have for younger persons. Course offerings at community colleges similar to those offered by private technical schools may be available at lower cost.

All of the shift away from vocational schools was among white students. The decrease took place primarily among persons at the lower end of the age group—those 35 to 39 years old—and this change widened the age difference between vocational school students and those enrolled in regular schools. As a result, more than half of the vocational school students compared with a third of the regular school students in the age group were 45 years of age or older in 1974. □

FOOTNOTES

[1] This summary is based on supplementary questions in the October 1974 Current Population Survey, conducted and tabulated for the Bureau of Labor Statistics by the Bureau of the Census. Data presented in this report relate to persons 35 years of age and over in the civilian noninstitutional population in the calendar week ending Oct. 12, 1974.

Since the estimates are based on a sample, they may differ from the figures that would have been obtained from a complete census. Sampling variability may be relatively large in cases where the numbers are small. Small estimates, or small differences between estimates, should be interpreted with caution.

This summary will be reprinted as a special labor force report and will be available upon request to the Bureau or to any of its regional offices. An earlier report on the same subject was Anne M. Young, "Going back to school at 35,"

Monthly Labor Review, October 1973, pp. 39–42, reprinted as Special Labor Force Report 159.

[2] *Digest of Educational Statistics, 1974* (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, National Center for Education Statistics, 1975), table 89, p. 76 and table 7, p. 10.

[3] Includes some people enrolled in elementary school programs.

[4] Data for all persons other than white are used in this report to represent data for blacks, who constitute about 89 percent of all persons other than white in the United States.

[5] Regular school is one which may advance a person toward an elementary or high school diploma or a college, university, or professional school degree. Attendance may be on either a full-time or part-time basis during the day or night.

Explanatory Note

THE ESTIMATES in this report are based on supplementary questions in the October 1974 Current Population Survey conducted and tabulated for the Bureau of Labor Statistics by the Bureau of the Census. The basic labor force concepts, sample design, estimating methods, and reliability of the data are described briefly in the following sections. 1/

DEFINITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

Population Coverage. Each month trained interviewers collect information from a sample of about 47,000 households located in 461 areas in 923 counties and independent cities, with coverage in 50 States and the District of Columbia. The estimates for this report include persons 35 years of age and over in the civilian noninstitutional population in the calendar week ending October 12, 1974. The civilian noninstitutional population excludes all members of the Armed Forces and inmates of institutions.

School Enrollment. The school enrollment statistics are based on replies to the enumerator's inquiry as to whether the person was enrolled in school. Enumerators are instructed to count as enrolled anyone who had been enrolled during the current term or school year in day or night school in any type of public, parochial, or other private school in the regular school system. Such schools include elementary schools, junior or senior high schools, and colleges or universities. Persons enrolled in schools not in the regular school system, such as trade schools or business colleges, are classified as enrolled in "special schools." Persons enrolled in classes which do not require physical presence in school, such as correspondence courses or other courses of independent study and training courses given directly on the job, are not reported as enrolled in a school.

Full-Time and Part-Time Enrollment in College. A person is classified as enrolled in college full time if he was taking 12 hours of classes or more during an average school week, and part time if he was taking fewer hours.

Age. The age classification is based on the age of the person at his last birthday.

Race. The population is divided into three groups on the basis of race: white, black, and "other." The last category includes American Indians, Japanese, Chinese, and any other race except white and black.

Marital Status. Women are classified into three categories according to their marital status at the time of the interview: Single; married, husband present; and other marital status. A woman is classified as "married, husband present" if her husband was reported as a member of the household even though he may have been temporarily absent on business, vacation, on a visit, or in a hospital, and the like at the time of the interview. The term "other marital status" applies to women who are married with husband absent, widowed, or divorced.

Employed. Employed persons are all those who, during the survey week, (a) did any work at all as paid employees or in their own business or profession, or on their own farm, or who worked 15 hours or more as unpaid workers in an enterprise operated by a member of the family, or (b) did not work but had jobs or businesses from which they were temporarily absent because of illness, bad weather, vacation, labor-management dispute, or for personal reasons, whether or not they were paid by their employers for the time off, and whether or not they were seeking other jobs.

Unemployed. Unemployed persons are all those who did not work during the survey week, made specific efforts to find a job within the preceding 4 weeks, and were available for work or would have been available during the survey week except for temporary illness. Also included as unemployed are those who did not work at all, were available for work, and (a) were waiting to be called back to a job from which they had been laid off, or (b) were waiting to report to a new wage or salary job within 30 days.

Civilian Labor Force. The civilian labor force comprises the total of all civilian persons classified as employed or unemployed according to the above definitions.

Not in the Civilian Labor Force. All persons not classified as employed or unemployed are defined as not in labor force. Persons doing only incidental unpaid family work (less than 15 hours a week) are also classified as not in the labor force.

Sums of Distribution. Sums of individual items, whether absolute numbers or percentages, may not equal totals because of independent rounding of totals and components. Percentage totals, however, are always shown as 100 percent.

RELIABILITY OF THE ESTIMATES

Estimating Procedure. The estimating procedure used in this survey inflates weighted sample results to independent estimates of civilian noninstitutional population by age, race, and sex. These independent estimates are based on statistics from the 1970 Census of Population and other data on births, deaths, immigration, and emigration, and strength of the Armed Forces.

Variability. Since the estimates are based on a sample, they may differ somewhat from the figures that would have been obtained if a complete census had been taken using the same schedules and procedures. As in any survey, the results are also subject to errors of response and reporting. These may be relatively large in the case of persons with irregular attachment to the labor force. Particular care should be exercised in the interpretation of figures based on relatively small estimates as well as small differences between figures.

The standard error is primarily a measure of sampling variability, that is, of the variations that might occur by chance because only a sample rather than the entire population is surveyed. As calculated for this report, the standard error also partially measures the effect of response and enumeration errors but does not measure any systematic biases in the data. The chances are about 2 out of 3 that an estimate from the sample would differ from a complete census by less than the standard error. The chances are about 19 out of 20 that the difference would be less than twice the standard error.

Tables 1 and 2 show approximations of the standard errors in this survey. They should be interpreted as indicators of the order of magnitude of the standard error rather than a precise standard error for any specific item.

The following examples illustrate their use. Among the 86,205,000 persons 35 years of age and over in the civilian noninstitutional population in October 1974, 1,502,000 were enrolled in school. Table 1 shows the standard error on this estimate to be about 55,000. The chances are about 2 out of 3 that the estimate would have been a figure differing from a complete census figure by less than 55,000. The chances are about 19 out of 20 that the estimate would have differed by less than 110,000.

The 1,154,000 persons 35 years of age and over enrolled in school who were in the labor force in October 1974 represented 76.8 percent of the 1,502,000 persons enrolled in school. Table 2 shows the standard error of 76.8 percent with a base of 1,502,000 to be about 1.7 percentage points. Consequently, the chances are 2 out of 3 that a complete census would have disclosed the figure to be between 75.1 and 78.5 percent, and 19 out of 20 that the figure would have been between 73.4 and 80.2 percent.

The reliability of an estimated percentage that is based on sample data for both numerator and denominator depends upon the size of the percentage and the size of the total upon which the percentage is based. Estimated percentages are relatively more reliable than the corresponding absolute estimates of the numerators of the percentage, particularly if the percentage is large (50 percent or greater).

1/ For a more complete description of the methodology, see Concepts and Methods Used in Manpower Statistics from the Current Population Survey (BLS Report No. 313).

Table 1. Standard errors of estimated number of persons

Total population

(68 chances out of 100)

Estimated number of persons	Total persons in age, sex group (thousands)								
	100	250	500	1,000	2,500	5,000	10,000	25,000	50,000
10	4.4	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5
30	6.9	7.6	7.7	7.8	7.8	7.8	7.8	7.8	7.8
50	7.5	9.5	9.8	10.0	10.1	10.1	10.1	10.1	10.1
100	0	11.6	13.4	13.9	14.1	14.2	14.3	14.3	14.3
300		0	16	22	24	24	25	25	25
500			0	24	30	31	32	32	32
1,000				0	37	42	44	45	45
2,000					30	52	60	63	64
3,000					0	52	69	76	77
5,000						0	75	95	98
10,000							0	116	134
20,000								95	164
30,000								0	164
40,000									134

Table 2. Standard errors of estimated percentages

Total population

(68 chances out of 100)

Estimated percentage	Base of percentage (thousands)								
	75	250	500	1,000	2,500	5,000	10,000	25,000	50,000
1 or 99	1.7	0.9	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1
2 or 98	2.3	1.3	.9	.6	.4	.3	.2	.1	.1
5 or 95	3.6	2.0	1.4	1.0	.6	.4	.3	.2	.1
10 or 90	5.0	2.7	1.9	1.4	.9	.6	.4	.3	.2
15 or 85	5.9	3.2	2.3	1.6	1.0	.7	.5	.3	.2
20 or 80	6.6	3.6	2.6	1.8	1.1	.8	.6	.4	.3
25 or 75	7.2	3.9	2.8	2.0	1.2	.9	.6	.4	.3
35 or 65	7.9	4.3	3.1	2.2	1.4	1.0	.7	.4	.3
50	8.3	4.5	3.2	2.3	1.4	1.0	.7	.5	.3